

Community and Diversity

One would be hard-pressed to find words more widespread in university rhetoric than "community" and "diversity." As a student, one is immediately enlisted to join the group, to get involved, to realize that one has become a part of the AnyU "community."

It starts during Previews and Welcome Week. We sing the AnyU alma mater with leaders; we learn the AnyU cheer. At the convocation that commences our freshman year, we are welcomed to AnyU with some statistics about our class, and then an entertaining PowerPoint presentation with voice-over begins: "In the year that you were born . . ."—it goes back eighteen years and shows a baby—"Ronald Reagan was president, AnyU was building its South Campus, and the movie that won the Academy Award was *Out of Africa*. We see graphics of all this, and AnyU history, at least for the past eighteen years, is interspersed with the shared "history" of the audience, which consists primarily of movies, TV shows, and dramatic historical events. "In 1986," the story continues, "the Emmy goes to *L.A. Law*, and the explosion of the *Challenger* saddens the American public." The presentation takes us briefly through all eighteen years of the baby-who-is-us.

By 1991 we have torn down the Berlin Wall, constructed the new AnyU library, and arrived at the same year that *Seinfeld* be-

gins. There is silence, clapping, or booing as the event being described moves us. Our history continues, year by year, to inattention, among other things, the end of the TV series *Cheers* in 1993, the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, the beginning of *Friends* in 1994 (to thunderous applause), and the September 11, 2001, attack. By 2002 we are eighteen and ready to go to college, and—the lights come on—here we are, part of the AnyU family.

The presentation works; it is relatively short, and students leave mildly entertained and energized, having experienced a compressed version of our joint heritage and our shared place at the starting line of something new. It is clear what the common heritage has been constructed to be. What holds students together, really, is age, pop culture, a handful of (recent) historical events, and getting a degree. No one ever remembers the institutional history or the never-sung alma mater.

How Community Works at AnyU

Youth, pop culture, and getting a degree are pretty accurately the ties that bind together a public state university "community." Unless it offers a big-time (and winning) sports team that draws large attendance and loyalty, there is little in the way of shared first-year experiences that three thousand or so freshmen will have in common. AnyU did have a Freshman Colloquium course that was mandatory for all first-year students. It was designed to be just such a community builder, one that required students to complete a summer reading assignment—usually a provocative contemporary novel chosen collectively by the participating faculty—that would be discussed in small seminars before classes formally began.

The faculty had an ambitious, and what they thought exciting, intellectual agenda in mind. Students would read the same book, and then their academic career would start with a stimulating seminar-style discussion with only twenty or so participants. The entire freshman class would be engaged in the same reading, and thus have a common basis for debate and dia-

logue. Freshmen would then meet the book's author, who had been invited at great expense to give a talk following their small-group discussions. This experience would jump-start the colloquium that would follow: a small, seminar-based freshman course centered on readings about community and citizenship, diversity, environment, and technology, designed to help them explore their journeys as "thinking persons," including the purpose of the liberal education they had begun. For the administration, the course was also a way to build a sense of loyalty and community, and thus, according to official belief, to retain freshmen as paying students.

I was in one of the last freshman classes to take the course. It was nullified as a requirement because the university faculty and administration concluded that it wasn't working. For one thing, only about a third of the students actually did the summer reading. My own pre-course seminar was led by an impressive instructor who practically pulled teeth trying to get a response to questions raised by our reading: "Does a common enemy help to make people a community? What is a typical American or an ideal citizen? Can anyone think of places within America that seem like a different country? Does technology bring you closer to or farther away from other people—does it separate or connect?" She ended up letting us go a half-hour early because, I surmised, of our silence. Very few in my seminar had read the book, at least "all the way through," as one student qualified it.

According to student surveys, many disliked the course that followed, in particular the idea that they "had no choice and that they *had* to take it," but also because it was abstract and impractical, and they didn't learn anything "related to their interests." The requirement, designed as the only common academic experience the freshmen would have, was accordingly wiped from the books, leaving an elective course, chosen separately by each student, in its place.

One can learn from the fate of the freshman seminar. It is a good example of what happens nowadays when efforts at

building community compete with the demand for choice. The freshman course had been designed and initiated at AnyU as part of a nationwide agenda, begun in the early 1990s, to engage students in their freshman year and quickly establish a "learning community." It was one local response to what educational policy analysts identified as a crisis in community that left the university to be experienced in "momentary and marginal ways." "Not only has cultural coherence faded," reads the thoughtful and influential 1990 report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "but the very notion of commonalities seems strikingly inapplicable to the vigorous diversity of contemporary life." Titled *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, the report called for a renewal of community in higher learning. Its authors wrote:

It is of special significance, we believe, that higher learning institutions, even the big, complex ones, continue to use the familiar rhetoric of "community" to describe campus life and even use the metaphor of "family." Especially significant, 97 percent of the college and university presidents we surveyed said they "strongly believe in the importance of community." Almost all the presidents agreed that "community is appropriate for my campus" and also support the proposition that "administrators should make a greater effort to strengthen common purposes and shared experiences."¹

It is a cry that has been taken up in earnest by university presidents around the country. Because *requiring* common experiences is vastly unpopular, and efforts often meet the fate of the freshman seminar, AnyU, like many universities today, encourages community through elective participation. "If you don't see what you like," said one Welcome Week booster, "start your own club." The 158 registered student organizations on campus don't tell the full story of the options that confront a student in a single week, from salsa dancing night at a downtown club, to the regular pickup game of coed volleyball,

to the Overeaters Anonymous meeting, to the self-defense lesson in the dorm, to the plethora of academic events that are part of lecture and film series.

Every week the hall bulletin boards are plastered with notices about new events to attend, new music groups in town, or organizations offering enthusiastic invitations to their open house. The proliferation of event choices, together with the consistent message to "get involved," and the ever available option of dropping out, creates a self-contradictory system. Students are confronted with an endless slate of activities vying for their time. Every decision not to join but to keep one's time for oneself is interpreted as "student apathy" or "program irrelevance," and ever more activities are designed to remedy them. Each decision to join something new pulls at another commitment, fragmenting the whole even further. Not only people but also community are spread thin.

In my life as a student this process of community building through elective involvement was repeated numerous times and in numerous places within the university. On my dorm floor alone, where we had not done much together as a group during my first semester, the process worked like this. To begin our second semester and usher in a renewed spirit of community, our enthusiastic RA devised an "interest survey," which she administered at the first mandatory hall meeting of that period. (Since it was second semester, the turnout was decidedly sparse: only six people attended.) "Let's do more things together," the RA suggested, and we agreed. It would be desirable, the collective thinking seemed to be, to have more "community" in the dorm.

"What would we like to do this semester?" she asked us. To find out, she distributed the survey with a written checklist that would assist her in launching new dorm programs that fit our interests and schedules. There were sixty-four activities suggested on the checklist in ten categories (community living, health/wellness, social awareness, employment skills, academic programs, relationship issues . . .), which ranged from presentation and panels, to group games and activities, to par-

ticipatory workshops. We could write in activities if the ones presented did not suit. There was also an availability section of the form, where we were asked to check our preferred times—which evenings, which hours—for the activities. Because the showing at the meeting was so meager, our RA placed questionnaires under each of the doors on the wing, to be returned to her by a specified date. I asked whether I could see the final tallies.

A total of 304 selections were made by all hall mates, with eighteen of the sixty-four listed activities chosen by approximately half of all respondents. The most popular choice was not an activity at all but an expressed interest in buying floor T-shirts or boxer shorts. Among activities, several—including swing or salsa dancing and playing board games—were high on the list, but the RA decided to start her local “community” program with the biggest vote-getter, “Movie Night,” endorsed by about three-quarters of the voting residents on the floor.

Movie Night was an activity whereby once every other week we would come to our RA’s room, as in Welcome Week, to watch a movie on video while sharing popcorn and other snacks provided by the RA or anted up by the residents. The preferred time, according to the questionnaires, was 8 PM on Tuesday. And so Movie Night was instituted twice a month on Tuesday nights, and slips of paper appeared under our doors to announce the first movie. On the first Tuesday, two people showed, besides the RA. The second time nobody showed. The RA moved the night to Sunday. Still nobody showed. The program was canceled, leaving the RA wondering what she could do to “really involve” her corridor.

Two organizational levels up from the corridor was the dorm. Here RAs and dorm officers attempted more extensive full-dorm programs that would get the residents involved. There were dozens of them, in addition to the corridor or floor-level activities devised by individual RAs. The most residents I ever saw attend any single event in our dormitory, housing about four hundred people, was for the talent show, where there were about twenty-one people—mostly the talent—and

the “How to Make Edible Underwear” program around Valentine’s Day, which drew twenty-three people.

With varying degrees of success, this was the pattern of “community involvement” that operated at various levels of the university: a multiplicity of voluntary activities, a handful of participants at each, and renewed efforts to create new activities that were more relevant and attractive, resulting in an even greater proliferation of choices and fragmentation of the whole.

The American Way: The Individualism in Community

To university administrators my story of Movie Night would be yet one more example of failing involvement and community on the contemporary college campus. By 1990 it was already becoming clear that few students participate in campus events; 76 percent of college and university presidents called nonparticipation a moderate to major problem on campuses.² An RA might count Movie Night as a personal failure, and become dispirited by the apathy of residents, or perhaps hear a call to invent more and better activities.

Students, I imagine, would see it a little differently. The activities chosen were not the “wrong” ones, nor were their RAs remiss. Nor had students been insincere in their desire for more community life in the dorm. If you had asked most students what happened with Movie Night, they would have answered, “I wanted to go, but when the time came, I didn’t,” or “I forgot.” They genuinely want to have a close community, while at the same time they resist the claims that community makes on their schedule and resources in the name of individualism, spontaneity, freedom, and choice.

This is exactly how many students talk about sororities and fraternities. Fewer than 10 percent of AnyU residents are members of either. When I asked students whether they’d considered “rushing,” instead of mentioning the “elitism” or “conservative politics” that dominated Greek critique in my day, students complained about “conformity” and “control of my

life." Judy explained that she had almost rushed but then changed her mind because "you become lost. It's hard to know all ninety girls in a sorority. You become the same rather than an individual in a group. It can get, you know, almost cult-like, and you spend all your time there. You can't live in other dorms, or meet new people."

I found that students' greatest objections to the Greek system were its steep demands—that it required so much time ("I can't give up that many nights a week to one organization") and so many resources ("Why should I pay all that money to a fraternity to have friends when I can make friends for free?"), all of them mandatory ("I don't want people telling me what to do and where I have to be all the time"; "I'm an individual, not a group person"). Yet, the one AnyU student in ten who did join a fraternity or sorority was, according to 2003 surveys conducted by the Office of Student Life, much less likely to drop out of school and much more likely to report the highest level of satisfaction with campus life.

There is a familiar dilemma here. "The very organizations that give security to students," concluded national policy analysts in 1990, "can also create isolation and even generate friction on the campus."³ More than half of university presidents were reported to view Greek life as a problem, largely because it creates "little loyalties" that isolate students, removing them from the mainstream life of the university. It is not just Greek groups that operate this way. They are only illustrative of what one university president saw as "a great deal of 'orbital energy' among the many subgroups, a magnetism that tugs at these groups, pulling them away from any common agenda."⁴

Struggling with community in this way is, as observers of American life have pointed out, the American way.⁵ The same things that make us feel connected and protected are the things that make us feel obligated and trapped as individuals and/or cut off from other groups with different agendas. For most students, as for most Americans in general, the "big community" has a dual connotation that includes both a warm and fuzzy

side, all about "oneness" or "togetherness" or "common purpose," and a negative side that tends to surface with reference to government regulations, Big Brother images, and fears of conformity. When students talk about their educational community, these contradictory ideas of community are reproduced, bouncing between an entity that provides love and a sense of belonging and one that limits freedom and imposes new obligations.

I initially encountered student thoughts about community on "introduction sheets," tellingly titled "IT'S ALL ABOUT ME," that the RA had asked us to fill out and hang on our doors. Aimed at "community building," the sheets posed questions designed to acquaint others on the hall with our opinions and personality. After blanks for our major, hometown, and favorite color, and prompts to name our distinctive qualities, "the things I like to do for fun," and "what makes you unique," was the question, "What does community mean to you?"

For half the students, community was a somewhat naïve amalgam of love, belonging, sharing, and togetherness—all the things we would want community to do for us with none of its obligations. It was, in their words, "respect; caring, open people" who would be "sharing together, always there for me"; a place where there are "pillows on the floor" and "everybody leaves their door open," where you can "crash on your neighbor's floor if you're too tired to go home." My favorite answer in this category was "Community means being able to fart comfortably," because it so perfectly ignores the possibility of being the one at the other end of the farting freedom who has to put up with her flatulent neighbors. Only one person, in fact, mentioned any kind of responsibility when defining community, stating that she would "pick up garbage when I see it on the ground."

The downside of the community coin was also well represented, with some students balking at the idea of community or making jokes: "Community means Communism"; "Community means dirt—do you realize how many germs infest

close-proximity living quarters?"; "Community means I can do whatever annoying habits I want and if my neighbors don't like it they can move out."

What I saw in student responses, as well as in student behavior, was a profound ambivalence about community life, resulting in a tentative, often conflicted relationship to the collective life of the university. Not only did campus participation suffer from this conflict, but also it was difficult to create mutual commitments and agreements among people whose connection to community was so hesitant.

One of the most interesting community ventures at AnyU came in the form of our second hall meeting in each semester, where we devised our "Community Living Agreement." Initiated by the RAs, these were to be the local agreements that each wing lived by, the "dos and don'ts" of hall life, fashioned by the residents themselves. The agreement for the first semester was drafted at a "mandatory" hall meeting at which seven people on the wing showed, one of whom left almost immediately because it was her birthday and she was too drunk to pay attention. After pizza, M&Ms, and yet another icebreaker game, the RA introduced our charge of creating a joint compact and handed out cards and pens, asking each person to write down something in the way of a rule or a "don't" that she would like to obtain for the hall. When we'd finished, the RA taped an enormous blank sheet of white paper to the wall, stood next to it with a marker, and said, "Tell me some of your items." Reluctantly and slowly, each person volunteered some rule. "Don't be too loud at night"; "Close the shower curtain so it doesn't flood the little anteroom"; "Don't leave your hair in the drain"; "Keep your door open when you're in your room (unless you're studying/sleeping)"; "Wipe your hair off of the shower walls"; "Don't take showers too long if there are people waiting."

There was no real discussion of any of the items. After everyone contributed, the RA took the sheet off the wall and left us to our candy. About one week later a large printed poster appeared on the hall, titled "Community Living Agreement," list-

ing eight items, half of them pertaining to showers and a few to hair.

The same process occurred during the second semester, although shower etiquette had a lower priority. Six items were posted in the hall for our second semester community agreement:

Keep hair off the shower walls.

Keep doors open while you're chillin'.

Sleepovers and parties on the hall are cool.

Yell "flushing" if there's someone in the shower [because the shower water turned scalding during the flush].

No writing on the bathroom stall walls [this was the RA's].

Say "hi" to people to be friendly.

Although the agreement no doubt reflected some important values held by the residents, including sociability, courtesy, and cleanliness, it was the relationship of the individuals to the community agreement that interested me most. There had been no road map for actually creating an agreement, no mechanism for turning individual opinions into a community document. No one, including the RA, was comfortable suggesting that we might modify, prioritize, or remove individuals' suggestions from the list. While the seven students in attendance were considered to "represent" the others, because the latter did not show up to participate, there was no means for making the "agreement" binding on hall residents. As a result, the list remained posted for a semester, but each student on the hall decided whether she would abide by the agreement or not.

I never once heard anyone yell "flushing" in the bathroom, nor did I ever see a "cool sleepover" or public party on the hall. It seemed to me that the same people who kept their doors open prior to the agreement, including me, were the ones who kept their doors open afterward. There was never any follow-up or discussion about whether our agreement was being honored.

Community in the American university is paradoxically a private and an individual decision. As Robert Putnam docu-

ments in his history of community in the United States, *Bowling Alone*, the private decision to participate in community life is one that individuals in recent U.S. history are making less and less. From civic and religious life to political participation and informal social connections, there is an increasing individualism in American life that is evident in our universities as well.⁶

In such a historical light, the trends in dormitory living are thought-provoking. The newest dormitories being built across the country are both higher in amenities and lower in density than those of the past. It is no longer considered a viable model of campus life to have a hall full of people sharing a communal bathroom, lounge, and washing machine. The old blueprint of collective living has given way to much more individualized and opulent arrangements. Put in student lingo, individualism "rules."

At AnyU, new dorms are all built "suite-style," with four students sharing a huge apartment with four bedrooms and two bathrooms, as well as its own living room, kitchen, and washer-dryer units. The private bedrooms and semi-private bathrooms are more acceptable to contemporary students, who are no longer accustomed in childhood to sharing a room with a sibling. In fact, according to AnyU's Office of Residence Life, the number one reason why students move out of traditional dormitories is that they do not like sharing a communal bathroom. Dormitories, like campus life as a whole, are increasingly privatized, well appointed, and focused on an ever smaller network of people that constitutes the significant living community of the student.

These national trends bring into clearer focus the use of space in my own dormitory, a building constructed in the 1940s for a 1940s student. One can see how new students with new values have refashioned the existing space. The dormitory includes big, cushy public spaces filled with overstuffed furniture which appear to be expecting a crowd. There are lounges on each floor, one with a fireplace and some with large outside terraces; they have tables and chairs, community TVs and VCRs.

After using these spaces as a student, I began to realize something that I subsequently checked by monitoring more public lounges in my dorm and others: fellow students didn't really use these areas as social space. With the exception of the cleaning staff on their lunch breaks, I never saw students bring food and eat together, sit and socialize together, or even watch television together in our local lounge. During the course of an entire semester, what could be called "community life" or even "social activity" was extremely sparse. I saw one or two card games in the lounge on my floor, one simulation game meeting, scattered study groups that assembled in the dorm to work on a class project, and a Christian group who occasionally used the space to work on volunteer projects.

My observations of lounges in other dormitories were not significantly different. These spaces often sat empty. During the day, no one used them at all. On most nights, the overstuffed couches and chairs in our largest lounge would be draped with one to three students who had positioned themselves as far as possible from one another. Interviews with the few students who *were* in the lounges during my observations revealed that the majority came there to "get away"—from a gathering in their room, music blasting on the hall, or a roommate with a guest. In other words, the community spaces were often a *retreat* from social interaction, a way to create more private options. They were no longer, as their builders had probably envisioned, primarily a place for people to come together and participate in joint activities.

One of my greatest epiphanies about community life in the dorm came on Super Bowl Sunday. I had sneaked home Saturday night, intending to stay at my own house until Sunday night, when I realized that on Sunday afternoon at 2 PM Super Bowl coverage would begin, and I needed to be at the dorm. The event had been advertised heavily in the hall for weeks. "Free Ticket," the flyers read, and the "ticket" entitled one to good company, free pizza, and drinks during the game. The large lobby had been set up with two big-screen TVs so as to accommodate viewers from any vantage point.

I arrived a little early to get a good seat and waited for the lobby lounge to fill, but by game time there were only five other people in the space. One had tuned the second TV set to a different program, so I and four others watched the opening kickoff together. A couple of months earlier, when I had been the only one in the lounge for the World Series, I simply assumed that the event was under-advertised and that this generation had no love of baseball. When I saw that the same no-show pattern had occurred with the well-publicized football event, I decided to investigate further. Where were the other students? I left at halftime.

Many, I surmised, had gone to sports bars. But as I wandered the floors of my dorm, I could hear the game playing from numerous rooms. On my corridor alone, where there were two open doors, I could see clusters of people in each room eating and drinking as they watched the game together on their own sizable television sets. It seemed telling to me that so many dormitory residents were watching the same game in different places, the great majority preferring to pass the time with a carefully chosen group of personal friends in their own private space. It spoke in a more general way to how community really worked in the university.

Rather than being located in its shared symbols, meetings, activities, and rituals, the university for an undergraduate was more accurately a world of self-selected people and events. The university community was experienced by most students as a relatively small, personal network of people who did things together. This "individual community" was bolstered by a university system that honors student choice, as well as a level of materialism in the larger society that, by enabling students to own their own cars, computers, TV sets, and VCRs, renders collective resources and spaces superfluous. These characteristics of American university life—individualism, choice, and materialism—stand out even more clearly in chapter 4, where foreign students at AnyU describe and compare their own educational systems.

AnyU's Real Community: The Ego-Centered Network

When I asked students in interviews whether they felt they had a "community" at AnyU, most said yes. But what they meant by community were these personal networks of friends that some referred to as my "homeys." It was these small, ego-centered groups that were the backbone of most students' social experience in the university.

On a daily basis these personal networks were easily recognizable within the dorm and on campus. "Where are you now?" says the cell phone caller walking back to the dorm from class. "I'm on my way home, so ask Jeffrey and Mark to come, and I'll meet you at my room at 8." Such conversations are everywhere. In the dorm, residents can be heard discussing the timing and location of dinners and after-dinner plans, and message boards record the social negotiations: "Be home by 5:30. What about Mexican? Call me—P." Creating one's community involved very conscious choices to make one's leisure hours jibe with selected others'. There were few open invitations in these exchanges. Unless the RA had planned an activity, there was no general call to join in on dinner plans or come watch a video in someone's room.

Among members of the same network, however, there were constant interactions, ranging from borrowing detergent and snacks, to arranging social and shopping trips, to watching TV or videos together, to working out. The communications among network members occurred both publicly, like the planning just noted, and privately, as I saw in student diaries, where frequent cell phone contact and Instant Messaging sessions were the norm.

The intense reciprocity of ego-based groups helped explain a problem about campus traffic that had long puzzled me. As a professor, I could never understand why campus roads were so hopelessly jammed between classes. After all, AnyU had a campus bus system, and students had parking permits only for the lots adjacent to their dorms. They couldn't legally park at classroom building lots and would receive a hefty ticket if they did.

When I pasted my student parking pass on my car, I found myself basically grounded—able to drive off campus and back to my dorm but nowhere else. Why, then, were the roads so crowded with cars seemingly traveling from dorms to classes?

It wasn't long before I saw message boards with reminders such as "Tara, don't forget to pick me up 10 AM at the Social Science building.—L." Or "Be out in the Education Parking Lot at 3:10—Nick." As I walked or took the bus to class, I began to pay more attention to the non-dormitory parking lots and realized that there was a vast web of personal relationships activated for dropping and picking up passengers. It was network reciprocity at work.

These personal networks grew in importance to me as I realized their salience in the life of my fellow students, and in the life of the university. I became increasingly interested in how friends are made, how groups are formed, and how activities are coordinated. I built these queries in to my interviews and discovered much that observation alone did not tell me.

Student networks, like family relations, are ego based. In a family, even your first cousin will have relatives that you don't have in common, and the same is true of two students who are in each other's networks. Pam and Terry are part of the same social network, but when they separately name their own closest friends, the names are not exactly the same. Pam includes her boyfriend and his roommate along with Alice and Marie in her close network, while Terry includes Alice, Marie, and Pam but also a friend from class whom Pam barely knows. And Pam's boyfriend shares only a few of Pam's friends. One student's network, although it may overlap with those of others, is essentially personal; no two people share the exact same group of friends. This is what is meant by ego based: even these intimate forms of community are quite individual.

Most students, I found, had established a network of two to six friends who formed their core university community. From the "native" point of view, they got together because "we like each other." Students regularly named personality traits and

attitudes to explain their attraction to friends: "They're outspoken"; "We're all a little weird"; "We like to have fun"; They're "strong-minded and focused like me"; they're "up for anything, and pretty laid back"; "We're the same when it comes to school, not big party-ers"; or they're "real friendly, open, responsible people."

To an outsider, especially an outsider who is looking at the points of convergence among a number of students, student networks have less to do with personality than with shared circumstances and shared demographics. Kyle, a Christian student on the floor, had a network of close friends for whom being Christian was very important. They'd met while they were still in high school, after attending several retreats that happened to be held at AnyU. By the time they came to AnyU as freshmen, they were already friends. The close networks of five of the six minority students in my sample contained several other minority students. A number of them had met their closest friends in an intensive pre-college summer program for first-generation students, where there had been a sizable percentage of minority students. One of the most surprising findings to me was the discovery that eight of fourteen students interviewed about the subject of social networks had one or more people in their close personal networks whom they knew from high school or their hometown. In all, then, many of the networks that endured through college were based on experiences *before* college, and these were conditioned by demographic characteristics such as religion, race, ethnicity, and/or hometown (itself a function of race, ethnicity, religion, and class).

Once in school, it was also edifying to learn how early the enduring friendships occurred in students' college life, and how little they drew on academic interests and contacts. Most students whose friends were cultivated after college began had met their closest friends by virtue of living in the same freshman dorm or floor. Classroom contacts figured relatively little in the social networks of students; fewer than one-quarter of my interview students had met a member of their network in

an academic class or in an activity or club related to their major, while almost as many had met a close friend through ROTC or work.

Despite the belief that college expands our social horizons and extends our experience to include new and different types of people, the findings suggest otherwise. The most significant relationships are formed either before college or very early in one's college career, most often in some shared affiliation, whether voluntary or not, such as freshman dorm assignment, special freshman summer program, ROTC, ethnic club, or sorority and fraternity rush.

Diaries and interviews confirmed that for many students, their social lives at the university consisted of repeated contacts with the same people, who constituted that student's personal network. Once networks were formed, usually by the end of the freshman year, students tended to stay with their groups, maintaining intense and frequent interactions with their network and more superficial and sparse contacts with others. The way that student social life is formed necessarily affects issues of diversity.

Diversity at AnyU?

Student networks may be able to explain, at least in part, the failed diversity efforts at many universities, and certainly at AnyU. About 22 to 25 percent of AnyU students are considered "minority" by federal standards, and minority students appear approximately in these percentages in AnyU dorms and classes. What makes diversity a "success" in a state university, however, is not only that the university population reflects the diversity of the general population but also that students become more involved in the lives and issues of that diverse population. Part of that diversity ideal is the hope that all students will develop friends and have important conversations with those of backgrounds and ethnicities different from their own.

The National Survey of Student Engagement tries to capture

this information by asking a student to self-report as to whether he or she has "had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own." In 2003, fifty percent of college seniors nationwide indicated that they "often" or "very often" had such conversations, while only 13 percent said they did not.

This jibed with the information I initially was getting from my interviews about social networks, where I was finding that many students named someone from a different ethnic group within their close circle of friends. The interview information, though, did not match my direct observations, and this led me to probe further by fiddling with my interview questions and format. I soon realized that if I started, as I had, by asking informants whether they had close friends from other ethnic groups, the majority of students would say that they did. If I questioned them further, they would name that man from a class, or woman on the same intramural volleyball team, with whom they had close contact and describe how they met.

If, however, I started by asking informants to name their closest friends and then later asked them to identify the ethnicity of the named people, it turned out that most students, but white students predominantly, ended up becoming close friends with people of their own ethnicity. Since I thought that this "names first, ethnicity later" approach was more accurate, I changed the order of my questions and arrived at a very different picture. Five out of six white students I interviewed in this way about their networks had no members of another racial or ethnic group in their close social circle; the networks of five of the six minority students contained one or more minorities (more on the details of this later).

One can see from the descriptions of how networks form why this might be true. Many students are building on contacts developed before they entered college, contacts that have strong demographic and social components. If many student networks begin with hometown contacts, what is the likelihood that they will cross class, ethnic, race, or even religious lines when the United States is demographically divided along

precisely these lines? Although there was one instance in my data of a cross-racial network pair with its origin in high school, the probabilities in this country work strongly the other way because of de facto neighborhood and school segregation. All other examples I found of high school or hometown friends in an AnyU network involved a woman or man of the same ethnicity as the person interviewed.

Even many relationships developed early in college contain a built-in bias. Although classes and interest clubs may be ethnically well mixed, this is not where students make their earliest school contacts. Freshman dorms are generally well integrated, but not several of the early programs and events that help introduce and acclimate new students, including Previews weekends designated for particular ethnic groups, pre-college "outdoor adventure" trips that cost extra money, a summer program for first-generation college students, or the opening round of sorority and fraternity mixers. Some institutional structures like these may encourage the early formation of same-ethnicity relationships.

There is no doubt that active racism also plays a part in the lack of diversity on college campuses. Yet, race or ethnicity is typically ignored as a topic of conversation in mainstream college culture, treated as an invisible issue and with silence. As Levine and Cureton (1998) found in their nationwide survey, students were "more willing to tell intimate details of their sex lives than discuss race relations on campus."⁷ When the subject is raised, as in the occasional class, students of color report being continually expected to educate whites about minority issues or speak "as a representative of their race."

Despite the general invisibility of the subject of race in informal student culture, there was not a single minority student I interviewed who hadn't experienced racism.⁸ Few openly complained, but everyone had at least one story to tell of comments made in class, rude remarks on the street, or just hostile looks. When I asked Pat, a Hispanic-Native American woman, whether she had ever considered rushing a sorority, she told me that she had in her freshman year, but "I could see that it

wasn't really right for me, because I'd pass by all the sorority tables—you know how they call out to girls to come over and take a look—well, I saw they called out to other girls but not to me. They just kinda ignored me, not hostile or anything, but not interested either."

"It's just how it is," another female student explained. "There are some good people and some not so good people, and you deal with it."

Who Eats with Whom: A Study of Student Dining

My very small sample of student networks and interviews was suggestive to me but not convincing that diversity in student relationships was in serious question. So I decided to conduct a larger observational study of students' informal social behavior. I chose eating as the focus, one of my favorite social activities, and asked the research question "Who eats with whom?" This seemed a fair and appropriate inquiry into diversity, to determine the range of people with whom one breaks bread.

It was my most extensive and longest-running "mini-study" of campus life. For five months I directly observed and recorded the dining behavior of fellow students during randomly selected periods of the day at optional dining areas on campus.⁹ Although some patrons carried out their food, returning to their dorms or outside benches to eat, many ate and drank singly or in groups at the various tables provided in one of five eating areas I surveyed. Sitting at a different table in the room, I would record who sat at each table by gender and, as much as outward appearances can signal, ethnicity.

It is always problematic to do research like this, because there is a wide range of appearances for all ethnicities, and many sticky issues. My interest, however, *was* in appearances, and in seeing to what extent students chose to share food and conversation with people who looked like them (or, more accurately, seemed to belong in the same broad ethnic category that an observer would attribute to them). Although there are other

kinds of diversity (e.g., age), I recorded only the data reflecting each person's gender and, to the extent possible, his or her category of ethnicity such as white non-Hispanic, Hispanic, Asian, African American, Native American, and so on. These were not easy calls. Sometimes I could tell only that someone was not a white non-Hispanic but couldn't identify the more specific group to which she or he belonged; at other times I could not tell whether a person was white and non-Hispanic or something else.

In gathering this information I had these questions in mind: To what extent did informal university activities (e.g., eating together) convey diversity? Did students eat in same or mixed ethnic and gender groups? Were there differences in the eating patterns of dominant (defined as white non-Hispanic) and non-dominant (defined as people of color) ethnic groups? Did any ethnic group or category eat alone more often than others?

I analyzed the data with regard to these questions but took care to analyze by person rather than by table in order to try to see the data through the eyes of the particular diner. For instance, if there were a table consisting of four people—a white male, two white women, and one Hispanic woman—each would have a different reality at the table: the male is eating with a table of all women of mixed ethnicity; both white women are eating at a table of mixed gender and mixed ethnicity; and the Hispanic woman is eating at a mixed-gender table where everyone is of a different ethnicity from herself. I recorded the data, preserving the perspective of each diner, and then analyzed the data in ten different categories that allowed me to examine the relationship of each table diner to the rest.¹⁰ In this way, I tracked almost 1,500 examples of dining behavior.

What I found was interesting. It showed not only an overall lack of diversity, as national studies report,¹¹ but also the existence of huge differences in the diversity experiences of dominant and non-dominant groups. Minorities (people of color) ate alone only slightly more often: one-quarter of minority women and more than one-third of minority men sitting in public spaces ate alone, a rate greater than that for white women and

men by 3 percent and 5 percent, respectively. But of all those who ate with others, only 10 percent of white men and 14 percent of white women ate at a table where there was anyone of a different color from themselves. Only 2.6 percent and 3.5 percent of white men and women, respectively, ate at a table of two or more where they were the only white person. The statistics were strikingly different for people of color: 68 percent of women and 58 percent of men ate with "mixed groups." People of color were ten times more likely than whites to eat in a group in which they were the only person of a different race/ethnicity at the table.

The same patterns I saw in the dining spaces proved true in the composition of personal networks when I compared a group of twelve students on my hall, six whites and six students of color. Although the networks of Caucasian students included more whites, and those of people of color more minorities, the total networks of minority students were primarily "mixed," comprising people of various ethnicities, including whites. One student of color was in an all-white network, while another had friends of only her own ethnicity. By contrast, five of the six white students had networks that were solidly white; only one white student had a mixed network, and none was the only Caucasian.

Seen in this context, minority ethnic clubs, dorms, and student unions have a clearer meaning. Ethnic-based groups are often clouded by perceptions that they, like the Greek system, remove their members from the mainstream and surround them with people of the same background. What the data suggest to me is that people of color are already heavily involved in interethnic and interracial relationships on campus. In fact, most of their informal dining contacts, as well as personal networks, included people who were ethnically different from them. Under these circumstances, an ethnic-based club—which half of the minorities in my sample thought was important in their lives—is better understood as a needed respite from difference, a chance to rest comfortably with others who share similar experiences in the world.

It was white students, most markedly males, whose social lives suffered from a lack of diversity. When white men *did* eat with those of different ethnicities, the majority of tables were "cross-gender." In other words, white men socialized at meals to a greater degree with nonwhite women or with groups that included nonwhite women. There was extremely little contact between white and nonwhite men. Only 4 of 489 white males, fewer than 1 percent, ate with (only) males of a different ethnicity, but 31 ate in different or mixed ethnic groups in which women were present. Men of color, while much more diverse in their dining, followed a similar pattern, tending to have fewer cross-ethnic male-only eating partners (7 of 79) while favoring cross-ethnic tables where women were eating too (24 of 79). The same pattern was not true of women. For both white women and women of color, their cross-color contact was primarily with other women.

One of the more disturbing but confusing findings was how few people of color, proportionally, used the common eating spaces. Only 13 percent of the entire dining sample was nonwhite, while 22 percent of full-time students were nonwhite. This left more than 40 percent of the minority population unaccounted for. There are certainly many ways to interpret what was going on. Perhaps this eyeballing approach to minority status simply fails to recognize many who are legal minorities. Perhaps there are economic factors at work that bear on having a meal ticket or buying food during the day that disadvantage some minority students. Perhaps the difference is explained by the larger percentage of minority students who enroll in off-campus programs. But there is another possibility that I entertained, which was related to my finding that more minority students eat alone.

My evidence is only anecdotal because I didn't formally monitor what I thought I was seeing, but this is what I noticed. I would observe the food court area as people got their food and stood in line to pay, watching each person leave the register to see where he or she went to sit in order to mark it in my book. I often found that instead of going to a table, however, a

person of color would go to a condiment area, pack up a napkin and the food in a bag, and leave. It seemed to me that a greater proportion of minorities was leaving.

One day, as I was just finishing an observation session, an African American woman left the register and headed for a table. She would be the last diner to enter my monitored space in the set time period. I prepared to mark her table choice, but instead of sitting down, she readjusted her backpack, took her food, and left. Where is she going? I asked myself. To meet a friend in a different area? To eat outside? I felt a bit like a stalker as I followed her out of the dining area and out of the building. She passed the outdoor tables and kept walking until she entered one of the freshman dorms, went through the lobby, and up the stairs. My guess was that she had returned to eat in her dorm room.

I will never know for sure what lay behind that one observation, or what I perceived to be the larger proportion of students of color who did not stay to eat. But it left me with the uncomfortable feeling that I was witnessing the effect of a "white space"—which I had never noticed because I am white—where people of color could eat alone publicly, or eat with people different from themselves, or go home to their rooms. Perhaps, many times, the dorm room just seems the most comfortable option, and this may have explained some of the missing 40 percent of minority students in the dining areas.

The ideals of community and diversity are certainly in place at AnyU and remain important components of stated university policy. Yet neither is fully realized in university culture, as I believe I have illustrated in this chapter. What I also hope I've illustrated, though, is what anthropologists mean when they say that a culture cannot really be divided into its parts; one part of a culture cannot be understood in isolation from its other parts, and all must be contextualized within the larger whole. Culture, we argue, is both integrated and holistic.

In just this way "community" and "diversity" are parts of university culture, but they are not intelligible on their own. As

the descriptions of student life attest, diversity is one part of college culture that is intimately tied to community, another part. And both parts are ultimately conditioned by structures in the larger American society—including values of individualism and choice, materialism, and the realities of U.S. demographics—that may seem, at first, to have little bearing on whether college diversity increases because freshmen Joe and Juan truly become friends, or whether Jane strengthens community by deciding to attend Movie Night. But they do. Not understanding this leads to a reality about diversity and community in university culture that does not match its rhetoric, and a persistent confusion about why this is so.